

Nomination Synopsis  
African Union Church and Cemetery of Iron Hill  
1578 Whittaker Road  
Newark, DE

This National Register nomination was prepared by the University of Delaware's Center for Historic Architecture and Design in consultation with and consent of Trustees from St. Daniel's Community Church of Iron Hill. Funding was provided by the National Park Service through a Historic Preservation Fund Grant Sub-grant awarded to New Castle County, a Certified Local Government, and managed by the Delaware State Historic Preservation Office. New Castle County's Historic Review Board approved this nomination on November 4, 2020 and it is scheduled for review by the Delaware State Review Board for Historic Preservation on February 24, 2021.

**Level of Significance:** *Local* – importance of a property to the history of its community, such as a town or county. [The Iron Hill community and New Castle County, Delaware]

**Period of Significance:** 1852 – 1970  
Archival research and physical analysis of historic fabric, conducted by the University of Delaware's Center for Historic Architecture and Design, concluded that the church was constructed between 1852 and 1856. Expanding the period of significance to 1970 takes into consideration the church leadership's decisions to add a vestibule, choir area, and create a small social hall on the premises by adaptively reusing chicken houses which were moved to the property. Since the two chicken houses, which became the social hall, were integral to the continued use of the church and contribute to the property's historical importance, these moved buildings are considered contributing resources. Prior to their installment and renovation of the buildings, the church had no dedicated social space for Sunday school, church dinner fundraisers, or a community meeting space. The addition of the social hall to the landscape reflects the evolving needs of its vital congregation.

General Statement of Significance:

African Union Church of Iron Hill, also known historically as Union American Church of Iron Hill, St. Daniel's U.A.M.E. Church of Iron Hill, and now called St. Daniel's Community Church of Iron Hill, is locally significant under Criteria A and C. It is the oldest known surviving free Black church that was built as part of Peter Spencer's African Union Church movement in northern Delaware. As a Spencer church, it is representative of the religious practices and culture of rural Black communities in New Castle County, Delaware, from the antebellum period through desegregation in the 1970s. It also reflects the vernacular

building practices of local Black congregations—particularly the construction of impermanent church buildings, Gothic Revival

Page 2

renovations in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and mid-twentieth century renovations using modern vernacular materials.

**Criteria:**

**Criterion A:** For property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

[*General Background Information:* This nomination showcases information about the African Union Church of Iron Hill which is the oldest known surviving Peter Spencer U.A.M.E. Church in New Castle County, Delaware. Peter Spencer, a free African American resident of Wilmington, Delaware created what Bishop Daniel James Russell considered to be “the first free and independent church entirely under the control of colored people in the United States” in his 1920 publication titled History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church.

Daniel James Russell, an elected and ordained Bishop in the City of Wilmington, Delaware described Peter Spencer as a dedicated Christian who believed that African Americans were entitled to equal religious liberty in respect to “their worship and service to God” and should be able to independently handle “religious business affairs.” Disenchanted with the Methodist Church by 1805, Rev. Peter Spencer legally established a free and independent church in Delaware through an Act of Incorporation dated September 18, 1813 under the name “Union Church of Africans.” In 1852, approximately ten years after Spencer’s death, his church was reorganized under the name of the Union American Methodist Episcopal (U.A.M.E.) Church. Fifteen years later, on November 25, 1865 during the First Colored Methodist Protestant Church conference in Baltimore, only a part of the group chose to unite with the African Union Church and established what became known as the African Union Methodist Protestant (A.U.M.P.) Church.

In Bishop Russell’s tribute to Rev. Peter Spencer, who died on July 25, 1843, he acknowledged the importance of Spencer’s thirty years of service to his church and people. He also mentioned that Rev. Spencer was highly respected by the community as a whole and conveyed that in his death, “... our race lost one of the great champions and devoted leaders.” *The Delaware Gazette*, a local newspaper, referred to his death by acknowledging that, “His character, veracity and honor were without reproach. He was intelligent and dignified and exercised a wonderful influence over his people.”

Today, the legacy of Peter Spencer's church continues through the fundamental principles retained by U.A.M.E. and A.U.M.P. churches located in a variety of states including Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.]

The African Union Church of Iron Hill is significant under **Criterion A** because it represents the centrality of Peter Spencer Churches as cultural institutions within Black communities in New Castle County, Delaware. As the last known surviving example in northern Delaware of a Spencer Church constructed by a free Black community prior to the Civil War, the church played a key role in forming and sustaining the community at Iron Hill, from the antebellum period through desegregation during the late 1960s.

**Criterion C:** For property that embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

African Union Church of Iron Hill is significant under **Criterion C** because it is the only known surviving example of a first period Spencerian Church built by free Blacks in antebellum Delaware. The building reflects the small size, impermanence, and plainness of rural Spencer Churches and, more generally, is representative of spaces in which New Castle County's Black population worshipped during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modifications to the building reflect the popularity of early-twentieth century vernacular Gothic Revival renovations, as well as updates with affordable, mass-produced building materials newly available in the mid-twentieth century.

**Criterion Consideration A:** The property is owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

Under **Criterion Consideration A**, the church building and its grounds serve as non-traditional documents that help chronicle the sometimes-elusive history of the free Black community surrounding Iron Hill, from before emancipation through the mid-twentieth century. Built on land given to the church by freeman William Walker in 1852, the present church building functioned as one of the community's most important institutions through desegregation in the late 1960s and now stands as the only known extant building of the antebellum-era free Black community at Iron Hill. However, the period of significance was expanded to 1970 to include congregational decisions which expanded the building and improved physical resources vital to the church's community outreach services.

**Criterion Consideration D:** The property is a cemetery.

Under **Criterion Consideration D**, the cemetery features a variety of Black burial practices, including impermanent grave markers that have disappeared, uncarved natural stones, and simple headstones. While there are approximately two dozen marked graves in the cemetery, many more are unmarked, having originally featured more economic simple wooden crosses or field stones, which deteriorated or were moved over time. The oldest marked graves date from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, a majority of which are simple upright, cambered granite or marble markers with minimal ornamentation. A handful of the late-twentieth century stones are carved with hearts or religious iconography, such as crosses, doves, and bibles. There are also three standard military-issued gravestones belonging to congregation members Private Frederick Wright, who served in the Civil War; Private Herman Wellington Taylor, who served in World War I; and

Private Willard F. Earl, who served in World War II. In addition to Earls, Taylors, and Wrights, members of the Green, James, Smith, Thompson, and Webster families are interred within the cemetery. There are presumably also, many members of the families first affiliated with the church, such as the Coombs family, buried in the churchyard, in now unmarked graves or marked by stones now worn and illegible.

**Correlation with Delaware's Historic Preservation Plan 2018-2022**  
**"Partners in Preservation: Planning for the Future"**

- Goal 1:** Strengthen/Expand Delaware's Core Federal/State Historic Preservation Program.
- Strategy 7:** Address gaps and biases in the state's inventory of historic properties.
- Action 7a:** Prioritize cultural resource survey and National Register nominations to address underrepresented communities or property types.

